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CAREGIVER COMPANION:

A Service-Learning Initiative in Tippecanoe County

Danielle Auckley (*Sociology*) and Jack Harber (*Economics*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

Danielle Auckley was a senior studying law and society in the College of Liberal Arts. She will be pursuing a juris doctor degree at Indiana University Maurer School of Law in fall 2019. She plans to focus on family law, specifically in the nonprofit sector. During her time at Purdue, she was a student-athlete on the women's swimming and diving team. Her research interests include family law, child advocacy, and social justice. She enjoyed applying her own interests in helping Caregiver Companion and began volunteering with the organization during spring 2019.

Jack Harber is a sophomore studying economics at the Krannert School of Management at Purdue University. With concentrations in statistics and data mining, he plans to pursue a PhD in economics and hopes to influence public policy through his research findings. His interests include reading philosophy and economics books, staying current on global politics, and volunteering in the local community. This article outlines his experience with Caregiver Companion and applying his economics background to help a local organization market itself to a larger community.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, approximately 38% of caregivers say they are highly stressed due to caring for another person (National Alliance for Caregiving, 2015). To lower this percentage, Sister Veronica Baumgartner, with the support of the Congregation of St. Joseph, founded Caregiver Companion with a goal to relieve the pressure that often comes with being a caregiver. Started in 1995, Caregiver Companion is a local nonprofit organization that supplies volunteer relief to elderly and disabled individuals and provides respite care for caregivers ("Caregiver Companion," n.d.). This network of interfaith volunteers demonstrates their belief in God's compassion and love to all their "neighbors," the term used to describe the people they serve. However, the organization struggles to market itself to both residents of the Lafayette area and Purdue's population. To assist Caregiver Companion, we engaged in a service-learning project geared not only to connect the organization to a

wider audience but also to build our educational experience and research acumen.

During the fall semester of 2018, we partnered with Caregiver Companion as part of a class project in English 420: Business Writing. Our goal was to specialize our resources and to produce physical deliverables that aimed at enhancing Caregiver Companion's communication and volunteer/donor engagement throughout the Greater Lafayette community. To accomplish our objective, we applied for and received \$3,400 in service-learning grants from Purdue's Office of Engagement, and this funding allowed our ideas to become reality.

During this four-month-long partnership, we applied our knowledge to helping Caregiver Companion market itself to Purdue University and the Greater Lafayette area. In this paper, we focus particularly on the effect of the marketing and communication, and donor engagement groups. We demonstrate that students



Figure 1. Caregiver Companion volunteer callout event held on December 5, 2019, in the Stewart Center, Purdue University.

can expand their human capital by acknowledging the comprehensive perspectives of dissimilar groups. This broad-minded approach assisted our efforts in achieving real objectives for the common good while complementing our education at Purdue. Although this service-learning project experienced some challenging aspects, we share the positives and negatives of our experience to encourage Purdue students to replicate our successes and improve upon our failures.

CLASS DESCRIPTION

English 420: Business Writing is a course designed to teach students rhetorical principles and necessary writing skills through the production of workplace business communication materials and working in collaborative group projects. The overall theme for the semester focused on business communication and enhancing community engagement through student learning. Our class was able to take these lessons out of the classroom and apply them to a real business setting. We were assigned two projects throughout the semester to help us engage with our community partner, Caregiver Companion.

First, we were assigned to write a well-researched white paper on the issues of elderly and disabled populations in the nonprofit sector. The white paper also included a brief background and history of Caregiver Companion and an interview with a neighbor, volunteer, donor, or board member. These interviews allowed us to get to know Caregiver Companion on another level and learn

about the impact on the community firsthand. With our main goal in mind, we were to create a well-written piece that would serve as a background to our overall class project. Each student conducted both primary and secondary research on their topic to gain a better understanding of the challenges nonprofits, such as Caregiver Companion, face regularly. Researching Caregiver Companion and their background allowed us to gain a better understanding of why their services are needed in the community and how our class could help in moving forward with the grant we received.

This all led up to our major project, a service-learning partnership with Caregiver Companion. Caregiver Companion visited our class to express their needs and desires for the nonprofit. Since Caregiver Companion is a nonprofit organization, their financial spending depends entirely on donations from individuals and corporate sponsors. These donations allow for their services to be free as well as to host events for the neighbors.

We also attended the organization's Caregiver Healing Retreat to learn about how the organization impacts neighbors outside of its free services. At the Caregiver Healing Retreat, weary caregivers were treated to fellowship, massages, care bags, and a gourmet lunch for a day-long break of healing. This event served to encourage caregivers to seek peace through God by opening up about their caregiving responsibility to other caregivers. By witnessing the peace and joy on the faces of these caregivers, we recognized the need for organizations

like Caregiver Companion to assist neighbors in our communities.

In order to serve Caregiver Companion in as many aspects as possible, the class was split up into four groups of six individuals to work on the different facets of Caregiver Companion. The four groups included: Donor Engagement, Event Planning, Volunteer Engagement, and Marketing and Communication. With students from a variety of majors, our class encouraged a specialization of tasks by allowing each student to incorporate his/her own unique perspective to the group's goals. Each group was given a different set of objectives and were responsible for creating print and digital materials Caregiver Companion could use to grow their organization and help them reach their mission.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Though the class had four distinct groups or objectives, in the remainder of this article we specifically address how two of our groups, marketing and communication and donor engagement, impacted our community partner, Caregiver Companion and their neighbors. The marketing and communication group focused their resources on spreading Caregiver Companion's mission to the Lafayette and Purdue community through digital and print materials in hopes of reaching a larger demographic in the community. The donor engagement group specialized their time on boosting donor acquisition among prospective donors while maintaining a healthy financial relationship with current donors. Similar to the spirit of business, charitable organizations compete for volunteers and donors, and this incentivizes innovative techniques to reach more people. In the following section of this paper we will expand on our respective group projects and the deliverables produced in each group.

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

The marketing and communication group focused their efforts on bringing more exposure to Caregiver Companion and informing the community of their positive effect in the lives of caregivers and their families. Our objective was to present Caregiver Companion to a larger audience using various marketing strategies and print materials. We decided to feature both print and digital forms of communication to target the larger audience Caregiver Companion hopes to engage. With the money awarded from the service-learning grant, we came up with three deliverables: a newspaper advertisement, video testimonial, and a newsletter. Each of the produced deliverables served as a different component for the overall project and had its own target and purpose.

Figure 2 is the newspaper advertisement that was printed in the Purdue Exponent a total of five times throughout the 2018–2019 school year. The advertisement was first printed on Thursday, December 6, 2018, and again February 7, April 11, June 13, and August 15 of 2019. Included in the advertisement was an explanation of the organization, details of volunteer opportunities, and Caregiver Companion's contact information. The purpose of the newspaper advertisement was to bring exposure to Caregiver Companion by targeting the Purdue student community and encouraging them to volunteer.

Our second deliverable, the video testimonial, included an interview with a current Purdue student-volunteer highlighting her volunteering experiences. We asked our interviewee questions about her volunteer experiences and how the organization has impacted her life and the life of her neighbor. The interview served as a piece of communication Caregiver Companion could use on social media sites and at event gatherings. The video

Volunteer Opportunities Available

Caregiver Companion is a non-profit organization located in Lafayette, IN that provides volunteer support to elderly and disabled neighbors of the Greater Lafayette area. Their mission is to relieve the pressure associated with being a caregiver and allow caregivers time for a refreshing break through non-medical volunteer assistance.

For more information, contact the Caregiver Companion office at caregiver95@gmail.com or (765) 423-1879.





 caregivercompanion.org
 Caregiver Companion

Figure 2. Newspaper advertisement printed in the Purdue *Exponent*.

was produced to appeal to students interested in giving back to the community by allowing viewers to relate to the volunteer's experiences. With the video, we were able to capture true experiences of a volunteer such that other students will be interested in getting involved. This video was posted by our partner organization on their Facebook page and has received a very good response from the general public.

Our third and final deliverable was a newsletter targeted towards the Caregiver Companion community. Our goal for the newsletter was to engage with community members who are already involved and keep them informed on Caregiver Companion's impact in the community. The newsletter included articles written by students as well as an interview with a current donor, neighbor, and volunteer of Caregiver Companion. The newsletter also included a feature of Caregiver Companion's healing event. The target audience for the newsletter was individuals in the community already involved with Caregiver Companion. We hoped this deliverable would keep individuals engaged with Caregiver Companion and allow them to witness the impact firsthand. We printed 500 copies of the newsletter and they were mailed to donors, volunteers, neighbors, and others involved with Caregiver Companion.

DONOR ENGAGEMENT

To reinforce the financial support Caregiver Companion needs to complete their objective of providing services to elderly and disabled individuals as well as caregivers, we established a two-pronged approach to appeal to donors. The first part involved a need to establish new relationships with prospective donors, such as parishioners, Purdue students, and residents of Tippecanoe County. Caregiver Companion asked us to help them with publicity, so we used the grant money and our design skills to compose a brochure targeted to prospective donors, which could be used during future mailings. By using this brochure with appealing colors and formatting as well as heart-warming pictures and testimonies from the Caregiver Healing Retreat, we believed that the brochure would raise the number of donors as well as the total dollar amount of donations.

Additionally, we produced a video highlighting the impact Caregiver Companion has on neighbors across Tippecanoe County. To appeal to prospective donors, we utilized testimonials from donors, volunteers, and neighbors that emphasized the selfless efforts of Caregiver Companion in the Greater Lafayette community. Soothing music encouraged the audience to empathize with weary caregivers and

elderly and disabled individuals who depend on Caregiver Companion's helping hand. This video built Caregiver Companion's trustworthiness as neighbors' jovial expressions demonstrated their gratitude for the selfless support of the volunteers at the organization.

The second half of our two-pronged approach concentrated on maintaining the relationship with the current donors by appreciating their contribution and compassion towards Caregiver Companion. We wanted to thank and express our gratitude on Caregiver Companion's behalf to current donors because their financial support is vital to the organization's success in Tippecanoe County. To meet this objective, we decided to send a thank-you package to around 50 individual donors. Each package included a printed brochure, a customized flash drive with our downloaded video, a handwritten thank-you card, as well as any other materials that Caregiver Companion wanted to send. Each thank-you card was handwritten to personalize the message between the donors and Caregiver Companion. Because postage comprises a large portion of their budget, we also paid for shipping and handling. This freed up financial resources for a budget-constrained organization by having their next mailing round paid in its entirety.

STUDENT IMPACT

Learning about the difficulties in the caregiver, elderly, and disabled communities expanded our awareness of their need for emotional and physical support. Although a generational gap exists between the neighbors served by Caregiver Companion and Purdue students, we actively bridged this divide through professionalism and empathy. It was humbling for our class to engage with a population that is often forgotten but nevertheless valuable and important to our community.

Over the course of the semester, our class focused on the difficulties that arise with communication in a business setting. Whether verbally or nonverbally, our culture is constantly communicating in some shape or form. Because of this, it is vital to know how to communicate effectively and efficiently. During the semester and specifically in our project with Caregiver Companion, writing in context became very important. Our job was to create deliverables that not only would serve their purpose but would also be constructed for their intended audience. At times this was very challenging for our groups because many people in our class were accustomed to writing for an instructor or professor, not an audience of individuals from all over the community. We had to make an effort to consider the population we were targeting while still

maintaining the use of professional language. Our work was mostly targeted towards writing and working with Caregiver Companion. Thus, with the help of feedback from Caregiver Companion and our course instructor, each group was able to create and produce deliverables that promoted Caregiver Companion to a larger audience.

Similarly, by writing multiple drafts of grants for each group, we enhanced our writing skills and grew cognizant of Caregiver Companion's needs. For example, in the first draft of the donor engagement group's grant proposal, the allocation of financial resources focused exclusively on current donors. Caregiver Companion disapproved of this draft largely because they had already found that more money spent on current donors did not improve their financial relationship with the organization. This feedback revamped the group's objectives by allotting a proportion of the budget to deliverables that engaged prospective donors to the organization. More importantly, the group produced deliverables that engaged both current and prospective donors, and this financial management freed up vital budget space.

Another challenge of this project was learning how to design. We have come to learn that document design is much more than pictures and color on a page but is instead made up of well-thought-out and complex designs that guide the project and are chosen to appeal to a certain audience. For example, the marketing and communication newsletter was carefully designed to appeal to the population Caregiver Companion serves while still getting the intended message across. In this aspect of the project, getting feedback and responding to it became very important. Occasionally our designs did not fit Caregiver Companion's requirements and branding; as a result they gave us suggestions on how to produce more acceptable documents. This process of revision became a crucial lesson for us because in the end we needed to produce materials Caregiver Companion could use to accomplish their goals. In order to do this, Caregiver Companion's needs had to be our highest priority.

In this project we learned that project management and teamwork go hand-in-hand. For example, each group was given the task to come up with a project plan and group contract. Both assignments served a very important purpose in the overall service learning project. The project plan allowed us to practice our organizational skills as they pertained to our specific roles. The group contract served as an important promise to stay on track and allowed us to keep each other accountable. We worked to develop strategies that would ultimately help us achieve our goal. Tasks were carefully assigned

to group members with the skills and abilities of the specific individual in mind. Our group stayed in constant communication in the latter half of the semester to ensure our project would run smoothly and to keep each other up-to-date on what we had accomplished.

One of the biggest takeaways from this project was the experience of working with Caregiver Companion as a client and the process behind revising our product to fit their needs and expectations. In this project, as well as in a real business setting, feedback becomes crucial to the overall final product. Our group needed to be able to take Caregiver Companion's feedback and use it to continually evolve the product, so it could be used for its intended purpose. We learned this process can be tedious and often time consuming, however, it was well worth the effort to create a product our community partner could use to help them achieve their goals.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

According to Caregiver Companion, the donor engagement group's package produced positive reactions in the community. After receiving the package in January 2019, a Caregiver Companion board member added the organization to her legacy giving. Additionally, Caregiver Companion informed us that the "best thing about the student's materials is [that they] will be able to resource the videos for future volunteer recruiting and community outreach."

As previously mentioned, there were four distinct groups working on this project. The event planning group saw the community impact of their work firsthand. The group planned an event to familiarize Purdue students with Caregiver Companion and encourage them to volunteer. The event planning group set up a booth in the entrance of the Steward Center. During the event, we distributed free donuts and coffee that we bought from the grant provided by the Purdue Office of Engagement. The event was supplemented with merchandise such as brochures, buttons, flyers, and banners produced by other groups in the class. In addition to this, Lauren Frecker, a Caregiver Companion employee, was also present in the event to support us and provide information to the students. Although this event was mainly put on by the event planning group, the whole class contributed.

Our class found the event to be incredibly effective. We distributed approximately 10 dozen donuts and 10 boxes of coffee. Thus, we estimate about 100 to 150 students came by the booth. Along with this, approximately 20 students signed up to either receive more information or

to volunteer. We also found many students who came by the booth had never heard of Caregiver Companion or the volunteer opportunities available.

To highlight our accomplishments from our community service project with Caregiver Companion, we submitted a poster to be displayed at the fifth annual Engagement and Service-Learning Summit: Connecting Through Listening & Scholarship in February 2019 (Figure 3). The ability to network with students and faculty allowed for a worthwhile discussion on the best practices of service-learning in the community. Caregiver Companion won Purdue University's Dr. JoAnn L. Miller Exemplary Community Partner Award for 2018 for engaging with our class and helping us learn. Specifically for local non-profits, this award distinguishes our educational growth through this unique service-learning partnership with Caregiver Companion. As evidenced by this prize, our service-learning engagement with Caregiver Companion served a meaningful purpose in our education at Purdue.

We hope that our work allows future students to develop ideas to assist Caregiver Companion in its mission, as

well as to continue practices that demonstrate a statistically significant boost in financial contributions and volunteer numbers. In fact, Caregiver Companion decided to expand their team and hire a part-time development and fundraising manager by the start of July 2019. After analyzing the careful research conducted by our class, the organization agreed with our proposal to improve their fundraising and marketing strategies. With this low-cost hire, Caregiver Companion will have the ability to focus on new fundraising and marketing techniques to help provide the financial means for the sustainability of the organization. Along with this, one of the authors decided to volunteer with Caregiver Companion after working on this project.

MOVING FORWARD

As the Baby Boomer generation retires in increasing numbers, there will be an urgency for more charitable organizations like Caregiver Companion. We hope that Purdue students recognize the gravity of a larger populace of caregivers and elderly or disabled individuals without a vibrant support system to assist this transition. Thus,



Figure 3. Authors with Dr. Steve Abel at the 5th Annual Engagement and Service-Learning Summit.

we urge undergraduates to take the lead in joining this service-learning movement with Caregiver Companion or starting a student-led initiative to solve these chronic problems with the caregiver and elderly population.

Eventually, Purdue students will graduate and enter the job market to begin their careers. However, learning does not cease outside the classroom. In particular, graduates should focus on implementing service-learning initiatives as their new communities will undoubtedly benefit from private investment projects that serve the dual purpose of meeting societal needs and enhancing human capital. In fact, since most businesses follow a corporate social responsibility strategy, defined as “a company’s discretionary actions and policies that appear to advance societal well-being beyond its immediate financial interests and legal requirements” (Jones et al., 2017), graduates with service-learning experience will serve as a valuable asset to their potential employer.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, by partnering with Caregiver Companion we proved that Purdue students’ endeavors can significantly impact the community around them. We highly recommend volunteering with the organization to young adults who want to broaden their understanding of the problems plaguing at-risk citizens in our local communities. Moreover, we recommend future professors of Purdue business writing classes to incorporate a semester-long partnership with local charities and organizations. This hands-on approach to service-learning and multicultural communication supplemented our educational

experience beyond the limits of the classroom. While the underlying problems still exist in our communities, Purdue students have the opportunity to shape the future of tomorrow. We hope that Purdue students welcome these challenges and commit to applying their education to assisting the most vulnerable in our community.

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